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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV KZ

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN - CHARGE'S VISIT TO HARE KRISHNA SITE ATTRACTS
INTEREST OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

¶11. (SBU) The Charge visited the Hare Krishna community 20 kilometers outside of Almaty on September 17. The Krishna community's property at this site has been the subject of a long-running dispute with local authorities, who have tried to force the Krishnas off of their valuable land plot. The head of Hare Krishna community, Victor Golous, led the Charge on a tour of the property, including the Hare Krishna temple, and described the problems the community was facing.

¶12. (SBU) Just minutes after the Charge's arrival, several representatives of the local akimat (i.e., government administration), including the head of its internal affairs department, also arrived at the site. They complained that the Charge was visiting the area without advance notice to the local authorities. They maintained that when the British ambassador had visited the Hare Krishna community, he had provided such advance notice. The Charge explained that he was not making an official visit to the region, but offered to pay a visit to the local akim (government administration head). After calling her superiors, the internal affairs department head said that there was no need to visit the akim at this time. (Note: The MFA has made clear to us that diplomats do not need government approval to travel within Kazakhstan. However, the MFA also requests that we notify them of any official travel outside of Astana, allegedly so they can ensure that protocol and security arrangements are in place. Local authorities will only meet with diplomats if advance request is made through the MFA. End Note.)

¶13. (SBU) Following this incident, Golous explained to the Charge that approximately 30 Hare Krishna devotees reside at the site. Several hundred people, he maintained, attend Hare Krishna services there on Sundays. This includes some local residents and their children, to whom the Hare Krishna community distributes food. Golous described relations between the community and local residents as amicable.

¶14. (SBU) Golous reminded the Charge that the Hare Krishnas had recently rejected five land plots offered by local authorities in exchange for the Hare Krishna's current property. According to Golous, two plots were too far (70 kilometers) from Almaty, out in the steppe with no roads, electricity, or water. The community needs water for irrigation and for its 30 head of cattle. A third plot was a former cemetery, and a fourth was adjacent to a cemetery. In the end, the authorities actually withdrew the offer of the fourth plot because they decided they wanted to expand the cemetery. The fifth plot is a dumping ground with no water or electricity supply.

¶15. (SBU) According to Golous, the Hare Krishna community's latest counterproposal to the authorities is that they would keep a 15-hectare portion of their current 47-hectare property, but not ask for any compensation in return. The authorities have not responded to this offer. Golous said that the Hare Krishnas have been invited to an OSCE meeting (presumably in Vienna) in October to explain their situation.

¶16. (SBU) Comment: The Hare Krishna stalemate may very well continue

for some time. The current climate for "non-traditional" religious groups (with, among other things, the government pressing for more restrictive legislation to control them better) does not augur for a mutually satisfactory resolution in the near future. However, as we have stressed from the beginning, while this dispute is in part about religion -- the government harbors deep suspicions about the Hare Krishnas -- it is also in part about a valuable piece of land that other interested parties want for their own benefit. End Comment.

MILAS